

PressRelease

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State extends date for ten-digit local calling, includes all of Western Washington

OLYMPIA, Wash. – Starting in the fall 2001, new or additional telephone numbers ordered in Western Washington will receive “564” as a new area code and customers will be required to dial 10-digits to complete all local phone calls.

In a unanimous decision today, the Washington Utilities and Transportation Commission (WUTC) approved a plan that will allow the new “564” area code to go into effect Oct. 20, 2001 for all Western Washington telephone customers. This change will affect residents who order new or additional phone lines living in the 360 area code (Olympia, Bellingham, Vancouver) and the Central Puget Sound region of Seattle (206), Bellevue (425) and Tacoma (253). In addition, all telephone customers must dial 10 digits to complete local calls, including calls made to the same area code.

This is the second delay ordered by the three-member commission in implementing the new “564” area code. Originally set to begin July 29 and affect only 360 residents, the WUTC extended the deadline to February 2001 when it was determined the telecommunications industry would not run out of three-digit prefixes until then. The commission also worked with the industry to find a way to postpone ten-digit dialing. In the meantime, the commission approved an area-code relief plan for the Central Puget Sound region.

“We asked the telephone companies to demonstrate they were using the existing prefixes as efficiently as possible, and they are making good progress,” said Marilyn Showalter, chairwoman of the WUTC. “It was especially important that the companies find ways to stretch the life of 360, since it means all of Western Washington can now start 10-digit local calling at the same time.”



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Under the plan, a new area code “564” will be overlaid over the entire 206, 253, 360 and 425 regions of Western Washington. All existing phone numbers will retain the current area code but new or additional phone lines will be assigned the new area code of “564.” This results in all local phone calls requiring 10 digits, including the area code and 7-digit phone number, to be completed.

All areas have already begun a permissive or transitional dialing period. This period allows customers a certain timeframe to be able to use the old or new area code to complete the call before the change is permanent on Oct. 20, 2001.

“We’re all creatures of habit so the extra time will really help customers get used to dialing the additional digits for local phone calls,” said Commissioner Dick Hemstad.

Under the current system, the North American Number Plan Administrator, a private company contracted by the federal government, doles out numbers in blocks of 10,000. With the proliferation of new telephone and wireless companies, many of the phone prefixes have been handed out, but not all are in use.

Last fall, the WUTC asked the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) for additional authority to order the telephone companies to improve their use of phone numbers, but that request has not yet been granted. The FCC said in March it would give states permission to reclaim unused telephone prefixes from companies but the commission is still waiting for that authority too.

In May, the commission convened a meeting of telecommunication companies holding prefixes in the 360 area code. Working together, the group was able to identify several strategies for extending the life of the 360 area code. Some of the methods include consolidating rate centers, returning unused prefixes to the number administrator, sharing prefixes and reducing the monthly allocation of new prefixes.

“We appreciate the cooperation of the industry in helping to coordinate a single date for the entire region as it will help minimize the cost to consumers of moving to this new system as well as reduce confusion,” said Commissioner William Gillis.

The commission received 309 public comments on the new 564 area code and mandatory switch to 10-digit dialing.

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